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ABSTRACT

Action learning is a potentially empowering management development strategy--empowering to managers and through them to employees. The core of the action learning process is similar to the empowerment process identified by Freire (1973), although the context of these approaches is very different: praxis. Praxis involves critical reflection on experience that leads one to see a problem in an entirely new way, to reformulate the problem, and to try out new strategies to solve the problem, many of which involve collaborative action with peers. In both approaches, participants become aware of the way in which taken-for-granted sociocultural norms have often been internalized and acted out without questioning. Although action learning is in some ways a very practical learning strategy, it departs from many of the purely behaviorist orientations to learning because its emphasis is not on shaping the individual to a predefined standard. Instead, it works from within to assist the individual in seeing his or her individual and social reality from different perspectives. The focus is not first and foremost on solving a problem more effectively, but on properly naming the problem before one even begins to think of strategies for its solution. In this way, it is suited to the challenge of today's managers who must take a proactive role in creating and managing change before they are overwhelmed by its effects. (KC)

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Action Learning: A Strategy for Empowering Managers[1]

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Change may well be the only constant in today's world of international business. To survive and flourish, managers of leading-edge companies have experimented with innovative responses to unfamiliar problems: e.g., entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship, decentralization, networking, participatory management, flattening of middle management, and a culture of empowerment (Kanter 1983, Naisbitt and Aburdene 1985, Peters and Waterman 1982 and Toffler 1985). Change has stimulated managers to create visions, take risks, and follow through by revolutionizing the way in which they do business. Tichy and Devanna (1986) write about the transformational leader who not only copes with organizational change, but works to make it happen.

Change is also stimulating managers to share more of their power with employees, although as Munnelly (1987) cautions, employee participation programs may often be cosmetic or insufficiently integrated with other dimensions of the organization to be successful. McLagan (1986) suggests that managers must become strategic thinkers in a new age of management development where judgment drives decisions and actions more than do procedures and precedents. In order to meet organizational needs for innovation, quality and productivity, managers must release in themselves and others creativity, participation,

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anticipation of challenges, and integration among levels within an organization as well as between the organization and its key interfaces. Burke (1986) and others reinforce the conclusion that successful businesses empower employees as well as and through managers.

This paper describes a strategy for empowering managers called Action Learning, drawing on both literature and the author's research and practice with a model developed by the Management Institute of Lund (MIL) in Sweden. The author suggests that empowerment, which often refers to the disenfranchised (those who do not hold power by virtue of their position in a social world), can be equally relevant to those who already hold ascribed power, in this case managers, even though the purpose, level of personal intensity, and social implications may differ. Nonetheless, the core of the learning process in empowerment of the disenfranchised or enfranchised is similar: a transformation brought about by critical reflection on experience that integrates learning about tasks, social norms and oneself.

Action Learning

Action Learning is a management development strategy that seems well-suited to empowering managers to both cope with change proactively and to empower employees to participate more proactively in this change. Action Learning originated with Reginald Revans (1971) in England during World War II. Revans observed that people learn best from and with others while tackling real-life problems. Under the right conditions, he found that learners developed "questioning (Q) insight" from their experience rather than relying on expert "programmed" (P) knowledge unsuited to their needs. Action Learning is designed to foster "Q" learning

through a group-facilitated cycle of action and reflection. "P" learning is added only after the learners are sure they need this knowledge and know how they will use it.

In describing Action Learning in business settings, Foy (1977) identifies three key principles on which it is based:

1. Mature people learn best when they are directly involved in real problems to which answers are not known.
2. One's own experience, together with that of others, can be examined to help find solutions to major problems.
3. Learning by doing is particularly effective when a problem is tackled in an unfamiliar situation (pp. 158-9).

One model for Action Learning has been developed by the Management Institute in Lund (MiL) in work with some 30 Swedish companies over the last eight years. MiL has translated Action Learning principles into the following model:

- Each program has 15-20 participants.
- Each program lasts 30-40 days and is spread out over an 8-12 month period.
- The time is evenly split between seminars and project work.
- Participants join project teams of three to four with no more than one member from the same company or department on each team. Each team represents a broad mix of perspectives and backgrounds.
- The work and learning of each project team is catalyzed by a project facilitator and supplemented by 3 - 5 day workshops using outside resource persons to challenge participant thinking.

The core of MiL Action Learning programs is work in project teams on actual problems in companies other than their own. The unfamiliar environment minimizes automatic responses and forces managers to

become aware of and challenge assumptions. Facilitators help managers reflect on their experience in seminars where they also learn about the dynamics of their group interaction. Peers and leading thinkers invited as resources bring multiple persectives to the situation that help the group reformulate the problem, challenge participants' assumptions, and share their own theories. Managers thus learn from real-life conditions: complex problems, teams working under time pressure where members often do not know each other well, multiple stakeholders and sets of social norms and values, lack of goal clarity, and incomplete information.

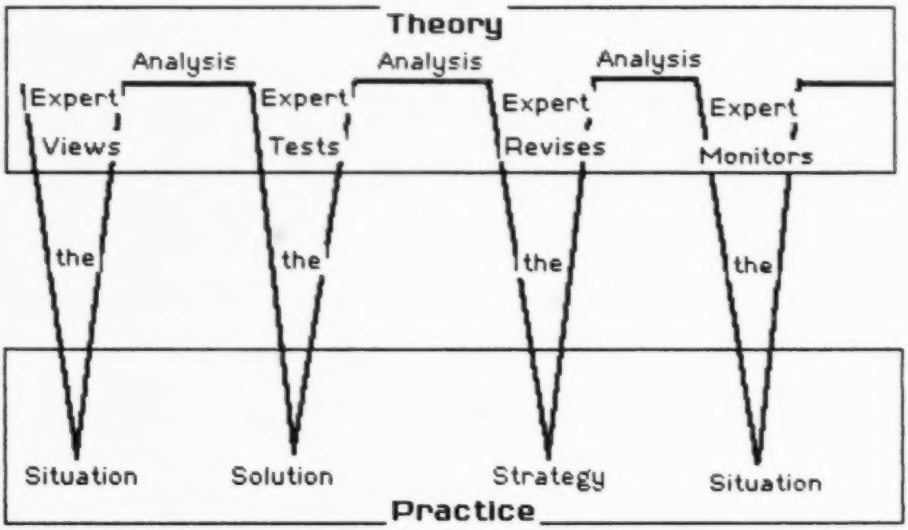
MiL's approach is similar to the pragmatic, experiential problem-solving "action research" approach of Lewin (1946). Action research, also used in organization development, is a spiral, interactive process in which actors identify a problem, plan an intervention, act, evaluate the action, and then re-evaluate the original problem statement and plan based on results. Lewin began with a general idea of what was wrong, not with a clearly defined hypothesis, and sought greater clarity as the cycle of research was repeated. MiL follows a similar cycle in its seminars so that managers learn to re-evaluate old data from a new perspective as much as they gain new information.

Expert vs. Actor-Supported Strategy

A principle of Action Learning -- which is also key to learning for empowerment -- is that the participants take the lead in the learning cycle. Managers are helped to build and examine their own theories-in-use through mutual collaboration among peers with different backgrounds, facilitators and resource persons. Figure 1 illustrates the expert strategy in which experts take the lead in problem solving and theory

development. Figure 2 shows the actor supporting strategy in which the manager (actor) takes the lead in the process, supported collaboratively by experts in all phases of the learning.

Figure 1: Expert Strategy

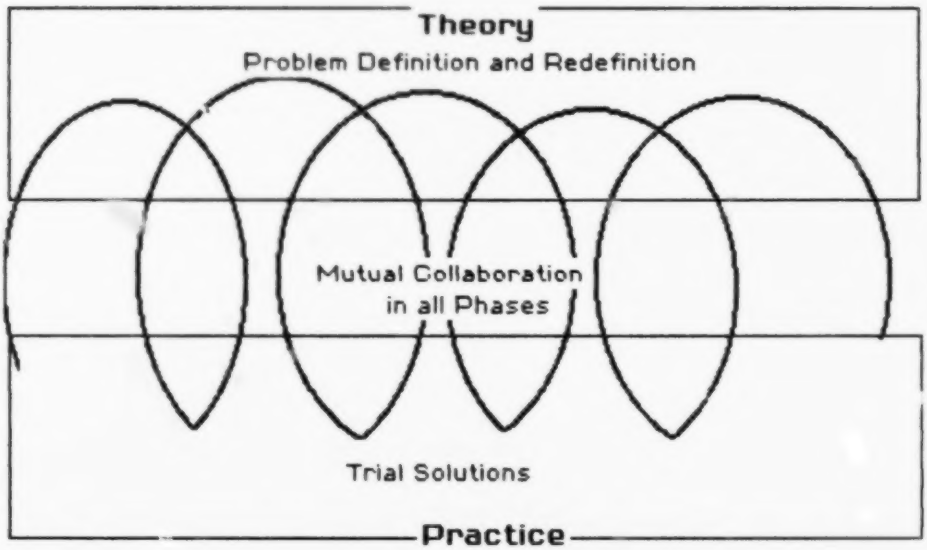


Source: L. Rohlin, Management Institute in Lund, Sweden.

The actor-supporting strategy is driven by facilitators who create the conditions for learners to reflect on experience, both individually and as a group. Various studies indicate that managers learn best from their experience, although they do not always have the benefit of the right kind of facilitation to reflect critically and deeply on their actions. A Honeywell study, for example, found that 50% of the ways in which managers learned came from challenging job experiences, 30% from relationships with others in the organization, and only 20% from training (Honeywell 1986). However,

this study also showed that learning was not always effective unless the managers invested their best energy into the experience, developed personal learning agendas, and took the time after a project or assignment to reflect on their action (p. 13). These findings are consistent with a growing body of literature on how adults learn (Tough 1971, Knowles 1980, Brookfield 1986) and with Action Learning principles.

Figure 2: Actor Supporting Strategy



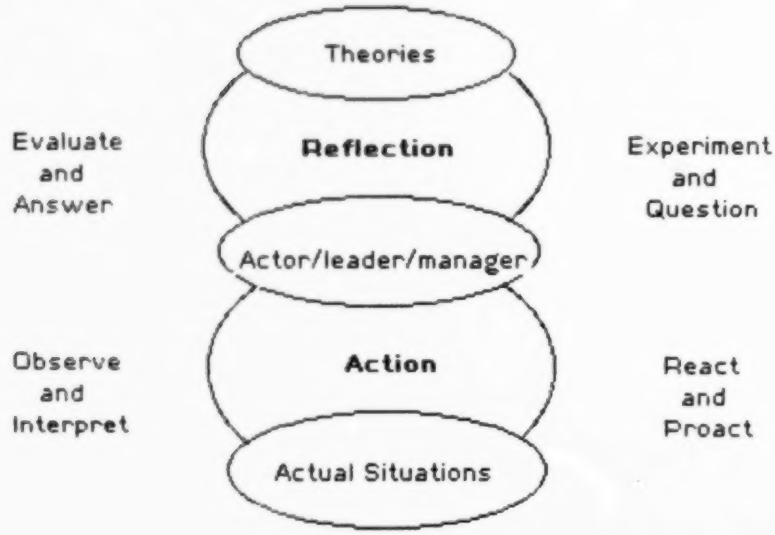
Source: L. Rohlin, Management Institute in Lund, Sweden.

Reflection, Critical Reflection and Transformation

Reflection is key to Action Learning. Figure 3 illustrates the way in which reflection is built into the Action Learning model. The manager moves back and forth between actual situations and theoretical models in a "search-and-learn" process. At different stages of the process, emphasis is placed on the various learning techniques identified outside the

circles. The manager in an actual situation reacts and proacts, and then is helped to observe and interpret the results of action. The manager is simultaneously helped to experiment with different theories and to ask questions that leads him or her to evaluate data in light of theories and to answer questions raised. In this way, the manager builds his or her own theories, tried and tested in actual situations.

Figure 3: Action Learning Model



Source: L. Rohlin, Management Institute in Lund, Sweden.

The nature of reflection in this process seems to go far beyond the almost simple, first-order kind of reflection that occurs when one's actions do not produce the expected results. Simple reflection prompts one to determine why action "x" did not produce result "y" in order to choose an alternative action. In Action Learning, managers are placed in situations where their usual repertoire of responses often do not work

because they have made certain assumptions about the situation that are not accurate. The managers must dig below the surface to question values, norms, beliefs and habits that may cause dysfunctional behavior of which they are unaware.

In this regard, Action Learning may at times be similar to the Action Science approach used by Argyris and Schon (Argyris and Schon 1974; Argyris 1982; Argyris, Putnam and McLain Smith 1985) who note that a gap frequently occurs between planning an action and carrying it out, or between espoused theories and theories-in-use. Arygris and Schon suggest that most people learn in a single loop rather than a double loop, terms borrowed from engineering and illustrated by the analogy of a thermostat. Single loop learning takes place when the temperature is continually adjusted to a pre-set temperature. Double loop learning takes place when someone questions the assumptions underlying the decision to set the temperature at one level rather than another. Both Action Science and Action Learning assist managers in questioning assumptions, examining values underlying action, and critically reflecting on their own ineffectiveness when things do not go as planned rather than looking primarily to external complications.

Action Learning effects a transformation of sorts in managers, an "aha" experience that enables them to see themselves differently as managers, to re-evaluate old experiences, and to recast their vision of their role as leaders in their companies and the world. Transformation in managers is both personal and social -- personal in that it is the unique understanding of one individual, but social in that this understanding is shaped by implicit and explicit organizational cultures which are then examined, interpreted, maintained and perpetuated by these managers.

Empowerment

There is no guarantee that Action Learning will result in empowerment as this term is often understood in the literature, that is, a kind of enfrachisement of the powerless. Empowerment in the workplace is often equated with workplace democracy or participatory management. Some companies might select a problem of this nature for their projects, but this kind of empowerment is not typically the aim of companies participating in Action Learning programs.

However, transformation is personally empowering in an educational way when Action Learning helps the individual -- in this case, the manager -- to take off blinders that have filtered his or her version of reality and shaped his or her responses, to be more in touch with values and feelings that motivate action, to identify and explore unwarranted assumptions and assertions, and to act based on personal judgments that have been publicly tested and verified. Because the work of a manager is to work through others, personal empowerment should impact on subordinates and colleagues in several ways.

First, Action Learning might be used by managers in working with their own subordinates. While it seems logical that such replication should take place, a number of factors might hinder its occurrence. Managers may not possess the skills required to help employees think reflectively or to be critically reflective. The Prudential Assurance Company, U.K. found that their managers could not formally facilitate Action Learning for others in the company when they first tried this (Lewis & Marsh 1987). Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985) and Schon (1987) have identified tools and strategies for this kind of learning, but note that learning these skills take

time as in perfecting a game of tennis or golf. Furthermore, the facilitator must do more than establish a climate for open discussion. He or she must be able to confront individuals with viewpoints that might be personally painful, potentially embarrassing in front of peers, and conducive to vulnerability. Such confrontation may be difficult for an outside facilitator, but near impossible for a peer.

Even if Action Learning is not used in its entirety, the process might assist a transformed manager in dealing with difficult situations so that he or she might not act in a hasty, unilateral, or controlling manner without testing for assumptions. For example, a supervisor who has to discuss a performance related problem with an employee often infers motives or explanations without examining with the employee the actual examples on which the judgement is based, and avoids feelings or personality issues even if the supervisor deems them relevant. Action Learning can help the supervisor become more aware of inferences, more willing to deal with feelings, and more open to collaborative problem solving with the employee. The supervisor and employee might thus jointly analyze their mutual recollection of a situation, bring out and test hypotheses about what happened, and try out new behavior with feedback.

Action learning is also likely to open the manager to consideration of multiple perspectives before making decisions, and thus prompt him or her to seek information from a variety of stakeholders. Managers learn to give up the temptation to prematurely follow a "solution" before they have explored their own judgement. They also learn to bring into their decision making process those people in the organization needed to better understand the situation and formulate the problem before taking action. In this way they move increasingly toward functional interdependencies

while taking into account the uniqueness of each set of circumstances and the stakeholders at different levels surrounding a decision.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the possibilities for empowerment is the way in which personal transformation is embedded in the norms of the organization and the various cultural backgrounds of manager, subordinates and colleagues. Personal perspectives and action have been shaped by the implicit social contract of employees in an organization. Most of the time, employees act on what they have guessed these implicit norms to be, often without questioning whether or not their interpretation of "the way we do things around here" is accurate, and if so, whether it is cast in concrete or subject to negotiation. Action Learning trains managers to recognize and challenge these assumptions. When a manager begins to exhibit this kind of thinking on the job, he or she becomes a powerful role model that invites similar thinking in subordinates.

Conclusion

Action Learning is a potentially empowering strategy -- empowering to managers, and through/with them, to employees. The core of the Action Learning process is similar to the empowerment process identified by Freire (1973) although the context of these approaches is very different: praxis. Praxis involves critical reflection on experience that leads one to see a problem in an entirely new way, reformulate the problem, and try out new strategies to solve the problem, many of which involve collaborative action with peers. In both approaches, participants become aware of the way in which taken-for-granted socio-cultural norms have often been internalized and acted out without questioning.

Action Learning is in some ways a very practical learning strategy, driven in large part by a need to improve behavior. However, it departs from many of the purely behaviorist orientations to learning because its emphasis is not on shaping the individual to a pre-defined standard, but works instead from within to assist the individual to see his or her individual and social reality from different perspectives. The focus is not first and foremost on solving a problem more effectively, but on properly naming the problem before one even begins to think of strategies for its solution. In this way, it is suited to the challenge of today's managers who, as pointed out in the introduction to this article, must take a proactive role in creating and managing change before they are overwhelmed by its effects and left in the dust.

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